



# Books as windows, books as mirrors



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**From our offices in El Paso** ...a fifteen minute walk to the Mexican-American border and la Ciudad Juárez—we've been watching the #AmericanDirt brouhaha with bemused but intense interest. For one thing, the controversy certainly authenticates what we've been doing for the last thirty-five years—publishing relevant books from Latinx and other communities. These books—windows and mirrors—speak.

The controversy revives memories and questions of how we became publishers in El Paso at the very edge of the literal political border between American dirt and Mexican dirt, the very edge of the American psyche. Lee is a novelist and short story writer, and I am a poet. Simply put, in the early 1980s we were not happy with what we were doing to make a living, and perhaps unconsciously we wanted a path into literature and books. With the encouragement of our good friend Joe Hayes, we decided to become a book publisher. It was a crazy notion, stupid even, although we didn't know it at the time. We were hungry for something real. We named our company Cinco Puntos because it reflected our Five Points neighborhood and the bilingual, bicultural and binational neighborhood where we live.

We didn't know what we were doing, and we did everything on the cheap. Still, we were very lucky. And we have very good friends. Our first three books were: Joseph Somoza's *Backyard Poems*, Dagoberto Gilb's story collection, *Winners on the Pass Line*, and Joe Hayes' bilingual storybook, *La Llorona, The Weeping Woman*. Our friend the graphic designer, Vicki Trego Hill, lived down the street. She designed all 3 books, creating the covers for *Backyard Poems* and *Winners*, and doing all the narrative illustrations in *La Llorona*. Those 3 books, in their own way, foreshadowed our coming history. We learned pretty quickly that Independent Publishing—the way we do it anyway, from the ground up—is an organic process. Like writing poems or stories, it's an act of self-discovery. We begin with what we know, what we learn, the everyday, the people, the languages, our neighborhood and friends, and as our vision grows toward other places, countries, languages, and stories, it's always suffused with that initial precept. This is our DNA.

"The path has its own intelligence," as Joy Harjo reminded me once.

So, yes, we are delighted that Lxs Comandantes de #Dig-

nidadLiteraria won a major battle against the Big Five Bullies (there used to be six, etcetera) from New York City. Their victory speaks to something embedded deep in our history. It brings national attention to our writers and our books. It emboldens us as publishers. But on the other hand, we are not looking forward to those guys jumping the fence in their fancy suits and trying to imitate what we do. Lucky for us, we've had long experience playing the David and Goliath game. We are reloading our slingshots.

I've not read *American Dirt*. I'm semi-retired and I don't want to read it. I've got other things to do. Still, because the controversy is more interesting to me than the book, I've read a number of detailed articles and comments about the book from my own gate-keepers—readers and writers (friends and acquaintances, folks I trust) with deep personal and intellectual roots that burrow deep into the border and the Mexican experience.

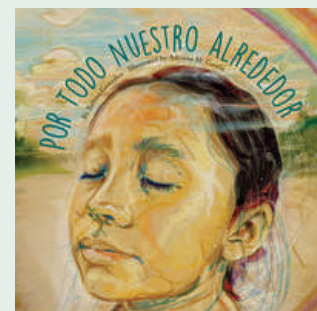
Thus, I've been thinking that an Indie Publisher with a long history of publishing Latinx writers needs to jump into the fray. Doing so, I must state from the beginning that this commentary is purely hypothetical. Jeannine Cummings nor her agent would never have considered an independent publishing company based in El Paso, no matter how successful we are.

Cinco Puntos would not have published a book like Jeannine Cummins' *American Dirt*. The manuscript would not have made it through our editorial gauntlet. Lee Byrd is our editor-in-chief. She asks that anyone submitting a manuscript first call her for a quick conversation. Because we live on the border, we've learned to be very sensitive to manuscripts about the border or Mexico coming from outside this experience. So many times the writing tends to be inaccurate and superficial. In Cummins case, Lee would have asked, What is your connection to this story? Is this simply research or do you have a deep personal connection to the people you are writing about?

The book probably would have passed this first test. The author would have told Lee about her years of research and travels, her Puerto Rican roots on her



Bobby and Lee Byrd, owners and proprietors with their son, John, in front of Cinco Puntos Press.



Por Todo Nuestro Alrededor by Xelena González.



Feathered Serpent Dark Heart of Sky by David Bowles.

She enjoys well-wrought sentences and paragraphs, she gets excited about surprising words and phrases, she loves good and deeply felt writing. She loves a good story.

She's a great believer in craft and voice. But her great asset as editor is that she reads from a place of innocence and not-knowing. She wants the writer to show her, to teach her, to move her. If she has questions about points of authenticity, she'll ask the writer, she'll ask me, she'll do some research, she'll call friends for their comments. Then she enlists more readers. Indeed, some of the readers Lee may have enlisted are writers who are leaders in the #DignidadLiteraria protests. The manuscript would not ring true. It would ultimately have been a quandary: why is a woman from Brooklyn writing about immigrants? We would have decided not to publish. This is just not the sort of story we could get behind. Lee would have written the author a nice letter, congratulated her on her good writing, thanked her for the submission and wished the book well.

Yes, yes, we're no dummies. We would never have received this manuscript. My feeling is that this book—no matter the author's original intentions—was auctioned and purchased, then edited, rewritten and “positioned” to make money. Lots of money. Flatiron Books had dialed in the formula for the NYT Best Seller List, and had Oprah and movie contracts in their sights from the beginning. The generic “American Reader” was identified. Checking for authenticity was sacrificed in favor of sales. Sales teams started hyping “product”, not books. That level of book publishing is about back-scratching connections and lots of money. That's how a three-day bidding war among the biggies goes up to seven figures in the first place.

Our editorial process has evolved from thirty-five years of experience of publishing books on the U.S./Mexico Border. We tell people that being in El Paso is both our chief weakness and our chief strength. We are not from New York City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Boston, the major media centers.

grandmother's side. Lee would have asked for, and received, the first 10 pages of the manuscript, and, because Cummins is a good writer with a solid track record, Lee more than likely would have asked for the whole manuscript. That's where the real trouble would have begun.

Lee is a well respected editor nationally. Cinco Puntos Press titles have won awards in a wide range of categories in adult, young adult and children's books. Writers appreciate how she has



The Cinco Puntos Press storefront in El Paso, Texas.

Without too much fuss, our colleagues in those cities can meet up and talk to reviewers from the major national newspapers, they even see each other at parties and on the subway. Not us, we've learned over the years to scream and shout to show off our books, to perfect our guerilla and social media advertising, and always, like Ringo Starr reminded us so long ago, to ask for a little bit of help from our friends. Our very good friends.

Cinco Puntos is a for-profit family owned corporation. Independent publishing is a difficult and financially tortuous adventure. A fragile business to be sure. The publishing highway is littered with the bones of wonderful publishing houses like ours. We're always scratching around for new sources of revenue, new avenues to sell our books. We've been lucky. We have a wonderful and devoted staff who understand what we do. We're distributed nationally by the good people at Consortium Sales and Distribution in Minneapolis. But most wonderful, writers and illustrators trust us with their work.

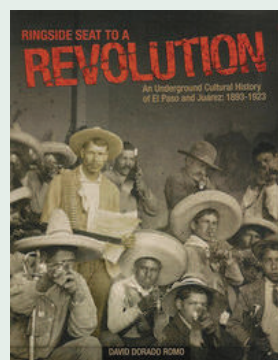
When reporters ask us, “Why do you say that El Paso your chief strength?”, I tell them this story. A number of years ago Jim Sitter, then the Executive Director of the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses, spent an hour or so explaining to me why CPP should become a non-profit organization. He almost had me convinced. I was ready. I was about to ask him what lawyers we should contact. “But you know,” he said, “if you do become a non-profit, you should

probably move to some place like Minneapolis or Los Angeles, maybe Santa Fe, someplace with donors with deep pockets.”

I laughed out loud. No, no, no. El Paso is where we live. It's in our blood. The city has become a primary lens through which we see the world. It's 75-80% Mexican-American and Mexican. Juárez, a city of at least a million is right across the border. Major corporations have figured out the cultural significance of this huge binational community years ago. It's why they test their products and advertising here. In so many ways, El Paso—for good or bad—is a snapshot of the future. If we moved, we'd dry up and blow away in the next storm.

So for us, it's obvious that publishing a book like *American Dirt* is just not what we do. It would be disingenuous at best. We would have lost faith with our community of readers, both here along the border and throughout the country. This is who we are. We are at home on the border. This is our American dirt.

Please buy books from, and continue to support, Independent Presses.



Ringside Seat to A Revolution by David Dorado Romo.